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THE ILLUSION OF WAR

by Norman Thomas

In the alarming drift towards World War III there is a factor of importance which requires examination. It is the widespread assumption that American participation in World War II was inescapable unless at the price of slavery; that our belligerency made the difference between total victory of the Fascist forces of Evil and their total defeat; that those who actively opposed our entry into the war before Pearl Harbor for whatever reason were fools, if they were not knaves.

The analogy to the present situation is treated as obvious; Soviet aggression has merely taken the place of German and Japanese. Our only hope of peace is force so overwhelming that we may scare Stalin as we did not scare Hitler. Friends of peace very generally confine their efforts to denying or minimizing the parallelism. Some of them, like Henry Wallace, set up a double standard of moral judgment, advocating in 1947 an appeasement such as they passionately opposed in 1940.

The differences and resemblances between the drive of the Axis and that of the Soviet bloc are important and need discussion. But it is the easy assurance that American abstention from World War II would have been impossible, or at any rate a kind of treason to humanity, which I wish to examine. And that not because I feel constrained to justify my own earlier conviction that America had not the wisdom and power to play God to the world by the method of war. From Pearl Harbor on I have steadily tried to defeat my own forecasts of evil.

Immemorially man has been handicapped in learning the lessons of history, partly because life affords no laboratory in which to repeat experiments so that we may learn the consequences of different choices under carefully controlled conditions.

Nevertheless, we can affirm with confidence in the light of available evidence that America was not forced into the last war by direct and unavoidable attack. In order to support its case for universal and compulsory military training in the United States, the President's Advisory Committee quotes brief statements from Hitler to prove that he gambled on the weakness of his victims. But he was referring to his European neighbors, all of them except Great Britain long afflicted with peacetime military conscription.

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So unwilling was Hitler to bring America into the war that for months he endured without reprisal all conceivable American aid to his enemies short of open belligerency. One of my sons was a member of an American Field Service Unit which left Halifax for North Africa with a large convoy of British troops a month before Pearl Harbor. They were carried in American ships and escorted by American naval vessels.

II

As for Pearl Harbor itself, that surprise attack should have been expected in view of American demands for complete Japanese abandonment of Manchuria as the price of peace. George Morgenstern's able marshalling of evidence in his book Pearl Harbor has been savagely attacked by reviewers, none of whom refuted his facts. At most they proved that he wrote like a prosecuting attorney rather than a judge, especially in discussing Roosevelt's role in the long series of events that preceded December 7, 1941. Despite the arrogance of extreme Japanse militarists we could at the worst have kept peace with Japan at the price of less dangerous concessions to her than Roosevelt made to Stalin at Yalta.

There can be no such clear evidence to refute the contention that a victorious Axis would later have attacked the United States. But there is plenty of evidence that there was no permanent bond of union between the rival militarists of Berlin and Tokyo.

The Axis had no force at its disposal to compare with international Communism and neither the Nazis nor the Japanese developed any capacity for winning or holding the loyalty of important groups in the countries their armies occupied. They could have established no parallel to the Soviet satellite States. Under the circumstances, if our only concern were American security, it is probable that it would have been easier and cheaper to develop a military strength sufficient to scare off an Axis invasion of our shores than it is now to frighten the Communists into respecting the Truman doctrine.

It is, as it always was, harder to answer those who demanded American participation in World War II as part of a holy crusade, than to refute those who argued easily that we could keep peace by doing those things which in the past had always led to war and who later contended that our enemies forced us into the struggle. But the world's misery is certainly proof enough that total victory cast out no devils of war and inhumanity.

III

We were told that we must go to war to end once and for all the economic and moral costs of militarism. This year, after total victory,

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the world spends on preparation for the next war ten billion dollars more than in 1938, when the military power of the "war loving" nations neared its height.

We were told that we must fight to end crimes against humanity, like slavery and the displacement of civilian populations. Today the victor nations, chiefly but not exclusively the Soviet Union, continue to hold more slaves in work camps -- German and Japanese prisoners of war and political offenders -- than Hitler ever held. And after the victory the signers of the Atlantic Charter have evacuated more civilians from their ancestral homes than Hitler was able to displace even in the midst of war.

We were told that we must go to war to stop the destruction of whole peoples like the Jews -- a destruction possible even for Hitler only in war. But after the triumph of righteousness in arms the desperate plight of Jews in a liberated Europe is the crowning argument of extreme Zionists for seeking to force the establishment of a Jewish National State amid the unwilling Arabs.

To us Americans one consolation offsets the price we paid and are continuing to pay for total war. Except for our belligerency Hitler would have imposed on Europe an even worse peace. But how much worse is speculative in view of the inability of the victors to achieve a peace of any kind. Without our intervention the war would have been greatly shortened and the physical destruction very much lessened. I doubt if Hitler could have destroyed Britain and Russia as successfully as the Allies have destroyed Germany, and the forces of resistance might have come to act as Europeans against their continental tyrant. Surely America -- outside of war -- could have found ways to serve the cause of liberty at home and abroad.

At this point the crusaders for a holy war plausibly assert that our great failure was not our entry into the war but our government's effort to make peace by such negatives as unconditional surrender, by vengeance against whole peoples, and by appeasement of Stalin; that what was won on the battlefield was lost in the secret conference rooms of Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam. I, who was always critical of Roosevelt's approach to peace however excellent may have been his intentions, find myself increasingly disposed to believe that his failures -- and ours -- were inherent in the method of total war even more than in his personal shortcomings in character and judgment. One may almost lay it down as a law of life that the price of total victory in total war is incapacity to make a peace.

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If some of what I have been writing is necessarily conjectural, it is no matter of conjecture to affirm that a third world war against the aggression of totalitarian Communism, assuming total victory for the forces of "democracy," would lead to an even greater general disaster.

No country in Europe, not excepting Great Britain, can contemplate such a war with anything but despair. American survivors in the hour of victory would be more likely to turn totalitarian than to accomplish anything tangible in reconstructing the world for democracy. Harold Stassen is everlastingly right in asserting that: "the greatest basic competition in all history cannot really be decided by war."

Let him who doubts war's incapacity to settle any "basic competition" satisfactorily, consider one incontrovertible fact: the forces of righteousness were completely victorious in two allegedly holy wars, and the world, especially Europe, is nevertheless tragically more wretched and barbarous than in 1914. Still worse, there is less ground for hope in the rapid and humane progress of mankind than was the case before these wars.

The next war once more will be proclaimed, with much subjective sincerity, as somehow different, holier, or at least more necessary for civilization than any which has gone before. But the real difference if World War III comes is that it will be incredibly more destructive than its predecessors. Even if one assumes American victory, the forces of intelligent, or ordinarily decent, reconstruction would be definitely weaker than they are in this critical hour. Victory for the dignity of human beings united in a fellowship of free men must be won by methods other than the persuasion of atom bombs.

That is what Professor Burnham forgets in his recent book on The Struggle for Power. The struggle exists. It cannot be ended by appeasement. But Toynbee's Study of History, from which Professor Burnham quotes so extensively, is full of warnings as to the fate of all civilizations which have relied on the sword. How much worse reliance on the atom bomb!

The United States is not exempt from the insidious infection of militarism and imperialism. And more objective examination of World War II, the manner of its coming to America and its consequences, is a part of the thinking Americans must do, if they really desire to avoid World War III.

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Not Merely Gossip *A Supplement to* Human Events VOL. IV. NO. 38

By Frank C. Hanighen September 17, 1947

News, according to a classical definition, is an unanticipated happening. If we accept that definition the crisis which daily looms larger in all of Western Europe is not really news, even though it may fill the pages of the daily press. The present disasters were foreseen at the time of the signing of the Potsdam Agreement, which decided that the productive capacity of Germany, and consequently that of all Western Europe, should be sharply reduced.

This week the real news, though given little attention in the newspapers, is the changing attitude of China towards the United States. That change is pregnant with import for a nation with a Pacific, as well as an Atlantic, seaboard.

As is understood by all who know China, the matter of "face" is all-important there. Whether exalted or humble, every Chinese cherishes his personal dignity, to a degree unknown in our own easy-going society. To "save face" is vital, whether the man involved is Generalissimo or Shanghai rickshaw coolie.

When General Wedemeyer, on August 24, publicly denounced corruption in the Nationalist Government, its leaders lost face. Of course the Chinese Communists have capitalized on this gaffe by President Truman's special envoy. More significant, the recognized regime of Chiang Kai-shek is also reacting strongly.

Last week it made public a dignified statement, largely overlooked in this country, which freely admitted mistakes and blunders under the strains which China has been enduring. But underlying the appeal for better American understanding was a strong intimation that the Chinese are weary of being lectured by Americans.

This statement fell on deaf ears, for as a people we are much better in telling others how to behave than in minding our own business. So Nanking has sent us a broader hint. Sun Fo, the outspoken Vice-President of China, in a public statement on Tuesday characterized our policy towards his country as one of "vacillation, uncertainty and confusion," which it certainly is.

After General Wedemeyer's report to President Truman is made public, Sun Fo continued, China will know for certain "whether it would be better for her to side with the United States or Russia."

That, we suggest to those who wish to look ahead, is news. (F.M.)

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In the present "war of nerves," as waged by Russia, there is much discussion as to whether Moscow would push matters to the point of risking hostilities. Many observers doubt that the Kremlin would go so far, because of the Russian food situation. Officially, the Soviet Government has given out highly optimistic reports of this season's harvest. But they have been received with some skepticism.

Great progress in weather analysis was made in the United States during the war, and it is often said that our meteorologists can now accurately describe climatic conditions in all parts of the globe. These experts question whether the weather in Russia this summer has differed greatly from that which has reduced crops in Western Europe. Other data, carefully compiled from official Russian disclosures, reinforces this bearish opinion of the Russian food situation.

Russia's agricultural record in 1945 and 1946 does not point to a large production in 1947. In 1945, the Soviet sold France 550,000 tons of grain, but as a political gesture and not from surplus, for it is now known that many Russians were then on meager rations. Early in 1946, the Soviet Government promised its people abolition of bread rationing by the fall, but failed to keep the pledge. Moreover, prices of rationed food rose sharply last year, with bread prices the highest of all. The alibi given by the Government was unfavorable weather.

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The political aspect of Russian agricultural figures is stressed. In the early Thirties, millions died of starvation in some of Russia's best food-producing areas. Yet, Russia was then exporting food on a comparatively large scale, in order to get foreign exchange to pay for foreign machinery, needed to carry out industrial development plans. And Moscow denied there was a domestic shortage. Therefore, when reading optimistic reports on this year's crops, the wise recall that Russia tells the world just what Russia wants the world to believe.

In the critical struggle now proceeding in Italy, for instance, it is of great importance to Moscow that the Italian workers should regard Russia as a land of plenty; the United States as torn by domestic dissent and unwilling to send any of its food surplus overseas.

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Political observers show interest in reports that an Archbishop may soon be named to head a Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D. C. The appointment of a Catholic prelate to such a key position would surely be given no little political significance. For some years, Washington's Catholics have received their ecclesiastical government from the See of Baltimore, the oldest in the United States. But when a successor is appointed to the late Archbishop Michael J. Curley, Washington may be separated.

In Catholic circles, three prelates are mentioned as among those likely to be considered by the Vatican for this post: Archbishop Ryan of Omaha, Nebraska; Bishop Ready of Columbus, Ohio; and Bishop Hurley of St. Augustine, Florida. Archbishop Ryan and Bishop Ready have both had long Washington experience; the former as Rector of Catholic University here before he was named to the Omaha post in 1935; the latter as head of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, with headquarters in Washington, before he went to Columbus. Both "know the Capital."

There is naturally more talk of Bishop Ready to head the Washington Archdiocese, since he was more recently a resident here. On the other hand, Archbishop Ryan has been a Bishop longer than Bishop Ready and some believe that the Vatican will take this fact into account. Bishop Hurley served as an attache in the Vatican Secretariat of State before he was called to St. Augustine. His present difficult assignment is in Yugoslavia. The fact that he has this extensive foreign experience may weigh in his favor at this particular time.

Some Catholic quarters are inclined to speculate as to whether the Pope would make the new Bishop, if and when appointed, a Cardinal. There is discussion as to the wisdom of conferring such an honor, although there is some precedent in the long tenure held by Cardinal Gibbons in Baltimore. Would Protestant organizations react strongly? And would this higher position make the appointee less approachable than if he were an Archbishop?

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A member of the British Treasury delegation recently in Washington was heard to say: "We'll have to abandon planning and controls, and return to the free enterprise system, cost what it may. It's our only hope for survival. We'll have to accept slums, and long hours and low wages, but we would have those anyway under the Socialist system." We are informed that the speaker is an old Socialist.

Such an obituary may be premature. But there are signs of a sharp modification of thinking among moderate Leftists. For instance, Mr. J. Middleton Murry, Christian Socialist, had this to say recently in Peace News: "There are some who believe that justice consists in absolute equality, and that a producer community should be run on what they imagine to be the lines of the Kingdom of Heaven. The man who turns up at the eleventh hour should receive the same reward as the man who was on the job at dawn. The short answer to them is that only the eleventh hour man would be at work in that vineyard the next morning -- or the next evening. . . .

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"There are others who insist that capital, at least, deserves no reward at all. Again there is a short answer. If capital receives no reward, no capital will be forthcoming, and the enterprise will not begin. That capital should receive only a modest reward is entirely in order. The capitalist must make his share of sacrifice if a new and more humane system of production is to be established."

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While on the subject of producers, none too honorable mention should be made of a current U.S. Army Recruiting Poster, entitled "Man of the Year." It represents an upstanding Corporal at whom a great crowd of civilians, evidently intended to be a cross-section of the whole American society, are gazing in more than slightly gaga fashion. If the intent was to convey the unhappy thought that the non-producer is the "Man of the Year" the artist suceeded admirably.

The theme that the armed services exist primarily to provide security, sports and general whoopee for American youth seems to run through all the recruiting posters. That it is not very appealing is indicated by the unsatisfactory level of enlistments. General Eisenhower, who is worried by the latter, might give orders to advertise the old American virtues of long hours, stern discipline and hard work. Or would that hurt his standing as a Presidential possibility? (F.M.)

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A number of Members of Congress are now traveling in Europe and newspapers report that they are closely examining economic conditions to see if production can be increased. It is to be hoped that the Congressmen also will make observations about those moral conditions which decisively affect economic and political affairs. We present some quotations from a private memorandum written by an unusually percipient economic expert after a lengthy post-war stay in Europe:

"Men lose confidence in their own ability to surmount the imponderable forces arrayed against them, and they feel impotent before forces beyond their control. They tend toward cynicism, replacing morality with expediency as a criterion of action. Men lose confidence in their neighbors' good intentions. Nobody trusts anybody. Trust and confidence in man-run institutions disappear, and without this confidence society disintegrates along with its individual members. By comparison with this tendency, those persons of outstanding moral strength who are able to keep and act by moral standards shine forth more brightly in the sea of darkness. . . .

"The American State Department representatives abroad could do much more to create good will around the world. At present I fear they often do as much harm as good in the effort to build up good will toward America, and in the effort to express our good will toward foreign nations. A tradition has unfortunately grown up in the Department that its employees and representatives abroad are the most select group among the most favored nation on earth. Thus it is their prerogative to patronize the nationals of the nation in which they serve. They feel it is also their duty to remain aloof from the society in which they find themselves, and accept no idea which is not labeled 'American.' This aloofness creates a little island universe of physical luxury, intellectual stultification, and spiritual bareness. This atmosphere tends to deteriorate even the best young men who enter the service.

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Some who worry about the chances of peace today may take comfort in the words of Chateaubriand. In the troubled era following the fall of Napoleon, he said: "Europe, barring unforeseen events, will be disgusted with fighting for a long time. Napoleon killed war by exaggerating it."

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Book Events

The New Slavery, by Hoffman Nickerson. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co. $3.50. Reviewed by J. M. Lalley.

Some men, said Aristotle in a famous passage, are slaves by nature; and seeing on how vast a scale human slavery flourishes in many parts of the world today, we are obliged, as reasonable men, to ask ourselves if it is not, after all, an indestructible institution. Mr. Hoffman Nickerson in his treatise on The New Slavery reminds us that the decay of serfdom in Western Europe was quickly followed by the rise of Negro slavery in the New World; and that even while the bells were ringing in celebration of the surrender of General Lee, the social soil in all Western countries was being prepared for the recrudescence of slavery under a new and more terrible guise. Mr. Nickerson's book is a sort of elaborate footnote to The Servile State, published in 1912, wherein Mr. Hilaire Belloc predicted the ultimate enslavement of the masses in consequence of the various social insurance laws that were then being enacted for their ostensible benefit in almost every industrial nation. Much earlier than Belloc, indeed, Lord Acton had warned his contemporaries that slavery would complete the teleological design of Socialistic innovation, and Herbert Spencer, reasoning from somewhat different premises, had said the same thing.

What Belloc envisaged, however, was a gradual and half-voluntary enslavement as the propertyless class, or proletariat, created by a socially irresponsible finance capitalism, surrendered its freedoms of contract and of movement in exchange for a degree of material security. Mr. Nickerson believes that the evolution of the modern slave state might well have followed this pattern, had it not been for the Great War of 1914-18, the most momentous consequence of which was the Bolshevist seizure of power in Russia. The nationalization of industry, as long proposed by the Socialists and as actually accomplished in Russia, is possible, he believes, only under conditions of complete catastrophe, since it would inevitably wreck any economy that was not wrecked already. The clearheaded Bolsheviks knew very well that the control of production which they had assumed could be preserved only by brutal dictatorship and by ruthless suppression of all real and potential opposition, indeed by the elimination of almost every element of choice in the lives of their subjects.

Mr. Nickerson devotes a good many chapters to assembling and analyzing evidence concerning the operations of the great Soviet slave camps; but on these matters he is somewhat less informative than the Messrs. Dallin and Nicolevsky whose study of Forced Labor in Russia was published a few weeks ago by the Yale University Press. The usually logical Mr. Nickerson falls into a curious inconsistency in reckoning the number of slaves in Soviet Russia merely by the number of prisoners in these camps, who have been variously estimated between twelve and twenty millions. Yet it seems obvious enough that in any country where the penalty for refusing to work at an assigned occupation is to be sentenced to one of these camps, every one is by definition a slave. And there is some reason to believe that the difference between "free" and "slave" labor in Russia is scarcely much greater than between house-servants and field-hands in the ante-bellum South.

The only way of escape from the danger of universal slavery appears to be in historical retreat; that is, by reversing the conditions which have created the danger. Socialism may be the road to serfdom, but the road to Socialism, in Mr. Nickerson's view, has been through finance capitalism and the principle of laisser faire. In other words, the danger lies in the existence of the industrial proletariat -- in the steadily increasing numbers of men and women who have, as Ortega puts it, "no past and no future," who look to politicians for their salvation, and are thereby becoming, in the Aristotelian sense, slaves by nature.

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